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Iowa and the Rose Bowl

At my house — and I suppose this is true in the homes of many Iowans — I have a special shelf on the bookcase marked "Rose Bowl." There is a University Alumni Association bulletin outlining plans for a westward trip, a program of the Tournament of Roses parade, a program of the Iowa-Oregon State game, a pictorial review of the parade, a ticket stub to the game, and even a splintered, shattered piece of a goal post which once stood on the hallowed playing field at Pasadena, California.

Whenever I leaf through these mementos of a matchless trip, I vividly recall a late November afternoon in Iowa stadium in Iowa City, November 17, 1956, to be exact, that unforgettable day when Iowa defeated Ohio State and officially stamped itself as the Big Ten's Rose Bowl representative. Then I think of the afternoon, almost two months later, when the same Iowa team culminated its first Western Crusade with a brilliant victory for the Hawkeyes over the Beavers of Oregon State College.

I think, too, of the days and nights between the two games, and of the excitement which gripped the state prior to the mass movement of Iowa fans

to the Pacific. Historically, it must be recorded as one of Iowa's great moments, even by those who do not know a field goal from first base.

This, then, is the story of the Rose Bowl football game and of how Iowa got there and of what it did after it arrived.

In 1946 the Western Conference, or the Big Ten as it is more familiarly known, entered into an agreement with the Pacific Coast Conference which was to match a school from each league in the famed Rose Bowl game on New Year's Day. Illinois went out that first year, on New Year's Day of 1947, and thrashed a favored University of California at Los Angeles team, 45-14. It was the beginning of an unhappy series for the West Coast teams. Michigan represented the Big Ten the next season, and won, as did Northwestern and Ohio State, and then Michigan and Illinois again. Series score: 6-0, Big Ten.

The fans from the Golden West literally bubbled in 1953 when the Trojans of the University of Southern California shut out Wisconsin, 7-0, giving the PCC its first triumph in seven years of the series. But their joy was short-lived. Michigan State won in 1954, Ohio State in 1955, and Michigan State again in 1956.

By now, Pacific Coast fans were beginning to think they had a monster by the tail. The boys from the Big Ten, they were saying, were too rough, too big, too fast, too good. They won-

dered if a Pacific Coast team would ever win again.

Meanwhile, in the Corn State, 2,000 miles away, Iowa fans were wondering if they would ever live to see the Old Gold and Black representing the Western Conference at Pasadena. Prospects began to brighten when a new coaching staff, headed by Forest Evashevski, arrived in 1952. But the Rose Bowl still seemed a long way off. True, the Hawkeye teams of 1954 and 1955 had been prominent contenders for championship laurels, but both suffered a string of narrow and discouraging defeats, and there was little reason to think that the season of 1956 would be much different than those which had gone before.

The team had some material assets, including a favorable schedule, when the 1956 season was evaluated, but the personnel losses from 1955 were heavy, including such men as the late All-American guard Calvin Jones, halfback Eddie Vincent, and quarterback Jerry Reichow.

A group of Big Ten writers, making a pre-season tour of Conference schools, predicted a second division finish for the Hawkeyes in the race. No one, it seemed, thought Iowa had a chance to win the title. No one, maybe, but the coaches and the players. They must have thought they had a chance, for they fought like fury to keep it alive.

The team of 1956 started well by shutting out Indiana, 27-0. Next came Oregon State, an un-

heralded team from the Pacific Coast which forced Iowa to come from behind with two fourth-quarter touchdowns to win, 14-13. Wisconsin also fought Iowa to the finish before the Hawkeyes won, 13-7. Then it was a 34-0 triumph over Hawaii, the only "breather" on the Hawkeye card. The first real test, early season forecasters declared, would come against Purdue at Lafayette. To the amazement of seasoned football scribes, Iowa won that one, too, 21-20, by scoring three times in the first half and staving off a final Purdue threat in the last minutes to win. Now it was five down — and four to go. Iowa, for the first time in years, was leading the Big Ten at the halfway mark with a 3-0 record. But the strongest foes were yet to be met: Michigan and Minnesota and then Ohio State, all giants in a league of mammoth men.

It was Homecoming in Iowa City, with revelry, parades, and high excitement when Michigan arrived in Hawkeyeland. An unbeaten Iowa team was to meet a "jinx" foe which had defeated it for three straight years at Ann Arbor by coming from behind in the second half. This time 58,000 Iowa rooters were sure the tables would be turned.

Unfortunately, the game did not follow the script Iowans would have written. True to their tradition, the Wolverines fought back from a half-time deficit of 14-3 to win, 17-14, dampening the spirits of the Hawkeye throng by scoring the

winning touchdown with only 66 seconds left to play.

There were many who thought this was the end of Iowa's season and of its Rose Bowl hopes. A few may have smiled and said, "Wait till next year," as they trudged away from the stadium that afternoon. If so, their sentiment was not shared by the Iowa coaching staff, nor by the team. They took the defeat hard, but at the same time determined to try anew to unlock the gate to Pasadena.

They unlocked that gate — and stuck one foot inside — the very next week at Minneapolis against the Golden Gophers of Minnesota, who had tortured and humiliated Iowa in many a previous season. Iowa did it, 7-0, with a first-quarter pass from Ken Ploen to Jim Gibbons, a follow-up plunge of one six-point yard by fullback Fred Harris, a perfect conversion by Bob Prescott, and a frenzied defense throughout the rest of the afternoon.

Now, in a state noted for corn and hogs, roses had begun to sprout, figuratively speaking. Everyone, it seemed, had Rose Bowl fever, a disease which flushed the cheeks, quickened the pulse, made the pupils of the eyes resemble a pigskin, and had many who were not even "old grads" willing to join in an "Eee-Oh-Wah-Wah!" at the drop of a helmet.

One more miracle and Iowa would be westward

bound. But what a miracle! Iowa had to play Ohio State, a team rolling along with 17 consecutive Big Ten triumphs and two successive Big Ten championships. The Buckeyes, fresh from an easy triumph over Indiana, were to be well rested, while Iowa must surely feel the strain of three consecutive games which were not decided until the final minute.

When the day of all days was over, the Hawkeyes had proved themselves worthy of the most glowing press reports. Through a bitter and scoreless first half Iowa battled the bigger and faster Buckeyes on even terms. Early in the second half, the brilliant Ploen tossed a 17-yard pass (some later reported it as a 2,000-mile pass) to end Jim Gibbons for a touchdown. When automatic Bob Prescott missed the conversion try, one of only two that he missed in 26 attempts for the year, there were many who groaned. But in the end it did not matter at all, for the six points were as good as a hundred. Those embattled Hawkeyes up front turned back every thrust the Buckeyes sent at them and, at game's end, Iowa wound up in possession of the ball on the Buckeye one-yard line.

The end of the game marked a scene of wild pandemonium the likes of which Iowa stadium had never seen. It was Christmas, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving — all wrapped up in one big package. Mad, milling students tore down

the goal posts; the band tried its best to strike up "On Iowa!" while being overrun by exuberant celebrators; those still in the stands turned and hugged their neighbors, though in many cases they had never seen them before the game; and back down on the field, the members of the squad and just plain students carried men like Ploen and Gibbons and Alex Karras and Frank Gillingham on their shoulders off the field.

The final score had hardly been posted, the whistle atop the engineering building scarcely pitched to its highest shriek, before everyone, it seemed, had decided to go to California.

"We've had a Rose Bowl float ready since August!" said Governor Leo A. Hoegh.

"We had secret meetings last week to plan transportation for Iowans to the West Coast," said Loren Hickerson of the Iowa Alumni Association.

"I don't have enough tickets!" wailed Francis Graham, Iowa's business manager of athletics.

"California, Here We Come!" shouted thousands of Iowans, suddenly gone berserk.

The weeks that followed were busy, bustling, wonderful weeks for Iowans — especially if they were California-bound. How to go, when to leave, what to wear? A special rationing system was set up by University officials to handle the flood of ticket requests. Iowa received an allotment of 12,000 tickets, but orders for more than

that number were received on the very first day of the sale.

Long before Christmas, the great migration of Iowans to the West began. By car, by bus, by train, by plane, an estimated 15,000 Hawkeye fans poured into Los Angeles and Pasadena. It was called the greatest peacetime exodus of Iowans in history.

The team and coaching staff had preceded the bulk of Iowa fans by several days, flying from Iowa in mid-December for practice sessions leading up to the first re-match in Rose Bowl history. Oregon State, the team Iowa had nipped by a single point in October, had gone on to produce a surprise, as Iowa did in the Midwest, by winning the Pacific Coast title.

The Iowa band and Scottish Highlanders made the trip, through the courtesy of Oldsmobile. Stopping to prance and exhibit their talent en-route to California and again on the way home, both were immense hits, not only at the game, but at the Tournament of Roses parade, which featured a University of Iowa float, a State of Iowa float, a Keokuk float, and a Big Ten float dominated by Herky the Hawk.

The team, 44 men in all, was quartered at the plush Huntington-Sheraton Hotel in Pasadena and did its practicing at nearby Los Angeles Junior College. Oregon State was quartered near the ocean at Santa Monica. As the game time drew

near, Iowa was quoted as a 9 to 14 point favorite.

The Hawkeyes made the oddsmakers look good almost from the start, as a crowd of 97,126 fans — largest ever to see a Hawkeye team in action — sat in warm sunshine in the beautiful bowl in the Arroyo Seco. Early in the game Frank Gilliam, Iowa end, gobbled up an OSC fumble to set up Iowa's first score. Moments later, Ploen rolled out to his right, faked a pass, slipped past two tacklers at the line of scrimmage and headed down the sidelines. All but hemmed in at one spot, he was bumped and appeared to be falling. But he somehow regained his stride and sprinted into the end zone to finish a dazzling 49-yard touchdown run.

In the same period, big Don Dobrino, Hawkeye halfback, raced 40 yards through the Beavers to set up a nine-yard scoring run by halfback Mike Hagler, and it was 14-0 at the first quarter.

Things turned gloomier for Iowa in the second quarter. Oregon State scored, making it 14-6. Then Ploen was hurt and carried off the field to the dressing room. But Iowa did not let down. Reserve quarterback Randy Duncan took charge of the team and marched it on another scoring drive which ended with a five-yard end run by halfback Bill Happel. Bob Prescott's third conversion made it 21-6 at the half.

The hard-hitting and deceptive Hawkeyes blew the game wide open early in the second

half, sending Hagler on a 66-yard touchdown scamper on a brilliantly executed double reverse play from their winged-T formation. Prescott's kick made it 28-6 and the Beavers were obviously out of contention, although they scored single touchdowns in both the third and fourth quarters while Iowa was finishing off with a final touchdown in the fourth quarter on a 16-yard pass from Ploen to Gibbons, making the final score 35-19.

At the game's end, hundreds of Iowans thronged the field, fighting for a shred of the goalposts and carrying several of the Hawkeyes off the field on their shoulders. Ploen was acclaimed as the game's Most Valuable Player after a sensational performance which saw him complete nine of ten passes for 83 yards, run for 59 more, and direct the team in flawless fashion, coming back to play most of the second half.

That's how it was the year Iowa went to the Rose Bowl. The team that wasn't going anywhere, went all the way. The mute evidence of conquest and of valor are the keepsakes Iowans brought home from California.

Just before the Ohio game the team was told: "You have 60 minutes to beat Ohio State, and a lifetime to remember it!" Thousands of Iowans now share those warm and wonderful memories with the team . . . grand memories of the Rose Bowl game of 1957.

AL GRADY